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Foreword

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Photography, such a mystery! Its ontological status – swinging between art and science, document and archive, 'footprint' and interpretation – never ceases presenting us with questions, which are always up-to-date and never banal. This will be the subject of both the *monographic* and the *focus* parts of this issue.

The awareness of the creative and expressive possibilities offered by photography determined, in the history of this medium, a change of priorities; photography results from the artist's study, work, and choices. Although it is subject to manipulative interventions, this does not imply a loss of truth on its part (Batori). As Didi-Huberman pointed out, photography exists on a double regime, made of both truth and darkness, proximity and distance (Boccali). If the observer asks too much of photography, that is to say, if he/she asks for the 'truth' as a reflection of reality, then his/her expectation will be frustrated. If he/she asks for too little, then he/she will give up the true expressive power that characterises photography: "the 'splendor' that lies in the distance between the image and the thing" (Molder). Photography can also become magic, a magician's trick that seems to be opting out of reality in order to take up a strategy of multiplication. It generates 'doubles', reflections that claim their own rights, as in Jorge Molder's 'construction of images' (Rozzoni) or in the *mise-en-scènes* created by Miles Aldridge, who, like a movie director, crystalizes in his shots "tension, panic and tragic desire" (Carter).

In the aftermath of the Second World War, scholarship on the problem of the ontological status of photography focused on the substantial lack of authorship entailed by the photographic medium. This was seen as a mechanical process that – in theory – could take place without encompassing a human intervention or intentional

decision-making: the author's personality influences the choice of subject but it does not weigh on the final product as much as it does in painting. According to this interpretation – also supported by André Bazin (1944) – photography is not an independent form of art, as photographic images do not show an intentional relationship with the world (Moon). This ontological approach to photography theory (focused on the 'objectual' status of the photographic image) long dominated the debate in analytical aesthetics in the Anglo-American world. Roger Scruton, in an essay published in 1981, claimed that photography is not the result of an intentional action, but, rather, a process based on physical – optical and chemical – laws. A painting does not represent an object but, rather, it represents a way of seeing that certain object. A photograph is the 'substitute' of an object, and the photographer's view is not an element that determines the way in which the observer sees the object. Photographers can have a degree of control on details (and this is how they express their own 'style') but, by doing so, they accept to contaminate their medium, producing not a photograph but a sort of painting. Both Dominic Lopes's *Four Arts of Photography* (2016) and Diarmuid Costello's *On Photography* (2018) deal with these central and long-debated issues. On the one hand, we consider photography as an art form. Implicit in this view is the conviction that photographs can manifest photographers' individual intentions. On the other hand, "we assign photography an important epistemic role, privileging photographs over drawings and other representations in a wide variety of contexts precisely because they seem immune to the influence of photographers' mental states" (Abell – see *Focus*).

The intervention of a creative element – or the lack of it – has been often used to mark the boundary between photography and painting. However, history of photography in the twentieth century has showed that both photography and painting share ever-changing expressive potentialities – and this regardless of their mimetic relation with the object (Rougé, Mazzocut-Mis). In fact, photography, being a section extracted from the spatial and temporal continuity of the world, is open to any kind of projection on the observer's part. Whilst bi-dimensionality was one of the limitations that painting faced in its relationship with sculpture (Polacci), the alphabet of images brought to life by photography pushed the border beyond the traditional extension of sculpture (Laskaris). A good example of this paradigm is the 'fashion image', which is characterised by "a cross-modal interaction wherein we feel like we are both touching and are being touched on multiple levels" (Filippello).

In France, in the 1960s, Pierre Bourdieu published a collection of essays titled *Un art moyen*. In his introduction, Bourdieu pointed out that his definition of 'middle-brow art' entailed the practices from which emerged the relationships that the middle class had developed with culture – the symbolic values to which the photographic medium was subject. Rosalind Krauss, however, defined as 'middle-brow' amateur or non-professional photography, as pertaining to an 'intermediate' level half-way between high-brow and popular culture. It is easy to see that photography's 'original sin' – being both subject to a technological medium and actively involved in a relationship with reality – was, and maybe still is, difficult to wash. Accusations of technicity and an-authorhood are much recurrent than one might expect. Even those stances that undoubtedly carved new perspectives on photography, such as Pierce's, Kracauer's, Benjamin's and Krauss's, never pronounced the accused, photography, fully 'non-guilty'.

Unlike other 'mimetic' arts, such as painting and sculpture, which need a model in front of the artist, photography establishes with the object a relationship through a physical medium, which emphasises its being a copy of reality. Photography is therefore forced to be more realistic than figurative painting, as its involvement with reality prevents it from producing alternative imaginary worlds. Obviously, such an interpretation is reductionist.

As it is true for every art, photography's expressive meaning gains value when it is put in

the context of the relationship established between observer and object. Furthermore, post-production tools paved the way to a dimension in which technique is not predominant, but it is subject to the artist and to the artist's purposes (Laskaris, Polacci, Batori). From this perspective, digital techniques have fully unleashed the power of image manipulation. However, the recipients of images seem to be still interpreting photographs "as photographic images, not as hand-produced images or montages". "Our default photographic interpretation is independent of the specific analogue or digital technology by which the images are produced" (Batori).

Photography also separates the present from its immanent development. The present, then, becomes a present of death, as photography seems to show the impossibility of experiencing the present whilst it attempts to document it (Vitale). Only the spectator can inject new life into this form of death; new life which takes place in the imagination, in memories, and in simple contemplation. The spectator, who is an embodied creature living in the world, naturally contributes to the completion of the image (Moon).

The magical quality of photography is related to the "tiny spark of contingency" that "allows the beholder to experience a temporal movement between past, present and future. […] The 'here and now', the contiguity between image and reality which expands in time, short-circuits any direct and simple logic of causality between image and referent, and exceeds any semiotic theory or commonplace understanding of indexicality. Instead of causality, notions like contamination, combustion, irradiation or dissemination seem to grasp more accurately the logic of the singular spark" (Conceição).

In 1980, Barthes explained the resistance of photographic images to fit into linguistic codes in the light of the dichotomy between the rational, focused approach (*studium*) through which one looks at a photograph and the unpredictable irruption of an image detail (*punctum*) that catches the observer's attention. Therefore, if one gives up the attempt to provide photography with an aesthetic and historiographic canon comparable to that of painting or sculpture, one's attention shifts from a certain photographer's originality to photographs as signs, whose meaning results from the place they have in the wider social and cultural panorama. At the same time, however, one could say that photography itself becomes the fundamental mode of visual recognition/reading of the world; it is the form of determination and visual (therefore also aesthetic) codification of our perception of things (Laskaris).

Derrida – who, in the 2000s, reflected on the consequences brought by the development of digital technologies – claimed that we can legitimately ask whether a digital image can still be called 'a photograph'. The lack of a physical support able to 'preserve' the image, in Derrida's opinion, nullifies the difference between passive recording (photographic document) and active production (art). Is this really true, though? Should not we consider that a photographic image is never the natural, instantaneous and precise impression of a moment passively recorded by the photographic gesture? Photography cannot be reduced to a *hic et nunc*: through the technical performance, it does not only record a 'presence', but it produces it, it actively creates it. The photographic gesture encompasses both passiveness and activeness, the latter being especially related to the technique, and, obviously, to the work of the person who triggers the button and works in post-production. It is important to remember, then, that the notion of photographic means does not entail a notion "of what counts as a photograph" (Atencia-Linares – see *Focus*). If technique is a channel through which to convey some meanings, then photography becomes an infra-thin (*inframince*) phenomenon. On the one hand, it doubles reality, it acts on its behalf; on the other hand, it gains autonomy and sharpness, it shows more than reality itself and it shows it to us in a different way (Grazioli). Once again, then, we face a dichotomy: proximity and distance, fiction and reality, passiveness and activeness, nature and technique, singularity and multiplicity, immanence (negative film) and

transcendence (printed photograph) (Abolghassemi), analogue and digital (Batori). These dichotomies can be overcome – as Benjamin suggested – by emphasising the auratic element pertaining to transformations, analogies and affinities (Molder).

These dichotomies are also at the centre of this publication – analysed from different perspectives, whether philosophical, historical, artistic, or through the direct and practical experience of the artist. The variety of contributions published here underlines the liveliness of the debate about photography and the urge of the questions it poses.

The final part of this issue – *Varia* – collects five essays extremely significant. The critical analysis of some of Benjamin's reflections, such as the problem of repetition, enriches the discussion on photography with another point of view (Montanelli). Furthermore, Corrado Ricci's museum policy reopens the debate on visual diffusion of our artistic and archeological heritage (Cantelli). The remaining essays include an analysis of the complex relationship between the logical and the analogical dimension in the *Republic* of Plato (Meozzi); a study of the close connection of love, war, art and death in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, which sheds an unusual light on the meaning of art (Di Giacomo); a discussion on the intertwining of zen and artistic research in the Western world (Fameli).